



Change the Menu

A cafeteria revolution is under way. It's time to join the fight for healthy food.

By Samantha Cleaver



Each day, 30.6 million students eat lunch through the National School Lunch Program. More and more, the food that ends up on their trays—chicken nuggets, cheeseburgers, pizza—has come under scrutiny. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, child obesity rates have tripled in the past three decades. Currently, 19.6 percent of children ages 6 to 11 are overweight or obese, as well as 18.1 percent of children 12 to 19. Among children who were born in 2000 (today's fifth graders), "one out of every three Caucasian and one of two African-American and Hispanic children will develop diabetes," says chef Ann Cooper, the "Renegade Lunch Lady" who founded Lunchbox.org. "This is the first generation that will die at a younger age than their parents."

In response, education leaders are taking a fresh look at school lunch. Michelle Obama's Let's Move campaign has focused attention on school nutrition, many states are adopting stricter nutrition standards, and vendors are adjusting sourcing and recipes. "There's much more of a focus around the nutritional value of the meals," says Steve Dunmore, president of school services for Sodexo, a major school lunch supplier. Cathy Schlosberg, vice president of marketing and strategic development for Aramark Education, agrees. Schools, she says, "want to understand how we're going to provide nutritious meals to students." In general, vendors are cutting fat while increasing the amount of whole grains, fruits, and vegetables.

Challenges, from tight budgets to picky eaters, remain. "We need to find the balance," says Schlosberg, "of finding the choices students want and giving them the nutrition they need." Across the country, districts and schools are tackling the challenges of cafeteria food.

Changing Cafeteria Culture

New Orleans, Louisiana

In 2007, chef April Neujean, food services coordinator at Samuel J. Green Charter School in New Orleans, watched as students threw their lunches in the trash. The meals were standard cafeteria fare—chicken nuggets, canned fruit, chocolate milk. When Neujean asked the kids about the food, their criticism was unsparing. "We know you don't care about us," they told her, "because if you did, you wouldn't serve us this slop."

They had a point—Neujean was serving them food that she wouldn't eat herself—and the issue was about more than an unappealing meal. In communities like the Green Charter School's, where the majority of students receive free or reduced-price lunch, students eat at least half (50 to 80 percent) of their daily calories at school. "We have a huge responsibility to make sure we're feeding them well," says Neujean. "Our kids will never be able to focus and learn if they're worrying about hunger."

First, Neujean started making more meals from scratch—she served roast chicken using bone-in meat she ordered with federal funds, and perfected a jambalaya recipe that used brown rice. Along the way, she worked with vendors to align her goals with the food orders. "It's their responsibility to make the numbers work," she says.

Still, even with better food, the cafeteria wasn't an enjoyable place—it was either loud or rigidly silent, lines were long, and behavior problems were constant. So, Neujean and Donna Cavato, executive director of Edible Schoolyard New Orleans, set about making the cafeteria a more enjoyable experience. She replaced disposable dishes with sturdy melamine plates and silverware (more work for cafeteria staff, less work for janitors). They increased the lunch period to 25 minutes and staggered class arrival times to decrease lunch lines. Neujean focused on teaching kids how to talk with one another. Every day, she puts freshly picked flowers on each table, setting the stage for a lunch period kids can look forward to. Learn more about the Edible Schoolyard Project at esynola.org.

Training Lunch Teachers

Adams County, Colorado

In a cafeteria kitchen at Colorado's Adams City High School, Cindy Veney, manager of nutrition services, and 10 of her cafeteria staff spread their homemade marinara sauce (a mix of carrots, zucchini, onions, and tomatoes) over whole wheat crust and sprinkle

cheese on top. The resulting pizza is healthier than their old version, still meets federal guidelines for a school meal, and has received overwhelming praise from student taste testers. The new pizza recipe, which Veney and her staff will prepare this school year, was just the thing they were looking for when they signed up for School Chef Culinary Boot Camp, a program started in 2006 by New York chefs Kate Adamick and Andrea Martin. Since it started, the demand and enthusiasm for Culinary Boot Camp has increased. "Lunch teachers," as Adamick calls them, "are frustrated for being blamed for the childhood obesity problem, and want to change it."

The idea behind boot camp isn't new, exactly. When Veney started working in food service 21 years ago, she made school meals from scratch. Since then, her district shifted to pre-packaged menus, buying dinner rolls instead of making hamburger buns, shaking lettuce out of bags instead of chopping heads of lettuce.

At the weeklong boot camp, Veney learned basics like culinary math and how to handle raw meat. She also learned what it means to work in a professional kitchen, and the importance of lunch teachers as educators. "Lunch hour is a teachable moment," says Adamick.

At the end of boot camp, Adamick challenged the lunch teachers to change their programs. This school year, Veney will use the money she receives from the federal government to buy raw materials to make more food from scratch, and she is sending boot camp graduates to other schools to inspire more lunch teachers. Before, her staff thought of their work as a job, says Veney, but now they're proud of what they do and are excited when students tell them their food tastes good. Bring Culinary Boot Camp to your district from [s'Cool Food](#).

Changing the Conversation

West New York, New Jersey

When Sal Valenza, regional director for Nu-Way Concessionaires and food service director of West New York School District, was asked to join the Alliance for a [Healthier Generation's](#) Healthy Schools Program to improve wellness in the district, he agreed. "When we first started, it was a battle," he remembers. People were focused on details, not the bigger picture, and conversations were about reducing the amount of fat in the cookies served, rather than teaching kids how to make smart choices in the lunch line.

Valenza wanted to change the way students experienced food, so in 2006, he hired district chef Kim Gray. The chef, he says, "brings credibility to the food; the students know someone is making it." Once a month, Valenza and Chef Kim go to a school and plan a menu with a group of students. Creating menus for Spring into Wellness Day (pasta primavera, chicken, and New Jersey apples) and Go Red for Women Day (quinoa

and grapes, ratatouille) improved student buy-in and increased enthusiasm as they saw their creations on a menu.

Then, despite concerns that students wouldn't eat salad, Valenza started a salad bar in the high school hoping that it would sell 50 meals a day. For the first few weeks, the students ignored it, but then it caught on, and after a few months, the high school was selling 200 salads a day.

Farm Fresh in School

St. Paul, Minnesota

This school year, students in St. Paul, Minnesota, will sit down to a new, locally grown dish—buffalo and wild rice casserole. It's the latest development in St. Paul Public Schools' move toward healthier meals, bringing farm-fresh food to the cafeteria.

Starting in 2008, as part of the School Food FOCUS (Food Options for Children in Urban Schools) program funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, Jean Ronnei, director of nutrition and commercial services, and her team started building a closer partnership with farmers in their area. They figured out which farmers were already connected with their producers, found more farmers who would be interested in a partnership, and changed the menu to accommodate the Minnesota growing season. In fall 2009, the district brought in \$100,000 worth of local food, amounting to 57 percent of the overall produce purchased. This year, that will increase as schools receive even more local produce.

There was no change in cost to start farm-to-school. "We've been cautious about what we put on," says Ronnei. "I'm not putting something on the menu that we can't afford." Learn more about the St. Paul Public Schools food services at sppscafe.org and farm-to-school programs at farmtoschool.org.

A Healthier Breakfast

Houston, Texas

Every morning, students across the Houston Independent School District (HISD) line up, pick up their breakfast—scrambled eggs, sausage, and a biscuit; or yogurt, a muffin, a banana, and milk—drop off their meal ticket, sit down, and eat. The whole process, from getting in line to clearing the trash, takes 15 minutes.

Almost 80 percent of students in HISD receive free and reduced-price lunch, and many kids come to school without eating breakfast. In 2009, 40 elementary schools already participated in Aramark's First Class Breakfast, a universal breakfast program, but the school board and superintendent wanted to expand the program. They enlisted the help of Aramark Education's Dave Richardson, executive general manager of the HISD food

service program, to make universal breakfast mandatory in all the elementary and middle schools. By the end of the school year, Richardson and his team had brought First Class Breakfast programming to 163 schools. The program will be in 100 percent of the elementary and middle schools (220 schools) by this fall. The company will go from producing 60,000 breakfasts each day to more than 140,000.

According to the Food Research and Action Center, for every 100 children who receive free and reduced-price lunch, only 44 eat breakfast. In Houston, in addition to the increase in participation, the district invested in the equipment to set it up at the schools and provided large carts to help deliver breakfasts to classrooms. Aramark streamlined the delivery process to make sure that the budget broke even. As the company expanded from feeding breakfast to 33 percent of students to 80 percent, efficiencies helped them break even budget-wise, says Richardson.

Here are keys to making a universal breakfast program work.

Communication: Richardson made sure to talk with schools in the weeks before their universal breakfast programs launched, providing brochures, videos, and procedures. They mapped out the schools to figure out where the carts would travel, and responded to school concerns. Teachers, principals, and parents need to know the benefits of breakfast, including increased attendance, improved behavior and focus in class, and decreased tardiness.

Streamline the Process: First Class Breakfast is a straight-serve program: Each child gets all the meal components, which makes it faster to deliver food, and easier to ensure that every child has a balanced meal.

Use Breakfast as a Teachable Moment: Once the kids have their meal, the challenge is to teach them why they should drink their juice and their milk, or why they should try everything, even if they don't like it.